A cold case closed. New light on the life and death of the Lateglacial elk from Poulton-le-Fylde (Lancashire, UK)

Neue Erkenntnisse zu einem bisher ungelösten Fall: Das Leben und Sterben des spätglazialen Elchs von Poulton-le-Fylde (Lancashire, GB)

Paul Pettitt[1]*, Peter Rowley-Conwy[1], Janet Montgomery[1] & Michael Richards[2]

[1] Department of Archaeology, Durham University, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, England; email: paul.pettitt@durham.ac.uk
[2] Department of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada, and Department of Human Evolution, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany

Abstract - Since its excavation in the 1970s the Allerød, period adult male elk from Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire (UK) has been interpreted as a Lateglacial hunting episode, presumably by Federmessergruppen hunter-gatherers, albeit in the absence of typologically diagnostic artefacts. Lesions on several bones of the front body have been interpreted as evidence of lithic armatures (usually assumed to be arrowheads) and two uniserial bone harpoons closely associated with the elk's corpse provide the only human association with the kill. Here, we report on reanalyses of the elk's lesions and harpoons, arguing that they derive from the method of excavation rather than the death of the elk, and interpret the harpoons as evidence of a failed hunting episode probably deploying a two-pronged leister javelin. The first isotope analyses of the elk's teeth and bone reveal a restricted movement pattern entirely in keeping with modern elk, and a diet of lush aquatic vegetation that provides seasonal context for the kill.

Zusammenfassung - *Das in den 1970er Jahren bei Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire (Großbritannien) in den 1970er Jahren ausgegrabene Skelett eines Allerødzeitlichen männlichen erwachsenen Elchs wurde lange als Spätglaziale Jagdepisode, vermutlich von Jägern der Federmessergruppen, interpretiert. Diese Einordnung geschah, obwohl keine diagnostischen Artefakte gefunden wurden.*

Verletzungen an mehreren Knochen des Vorderkörpers des Elchs wurden als Schussverletzungen durch lithische Bewehrung (möglicherweise Pfeilspitzen) angesehen. Zwei einreihige Harpunen aufgefunden in der räumlichen Nachbarschaft zum Elchskelett sind die einzigen Belege für eine mögliche Beteiligung des Menschen an der Tötung des Elchs. In dem vorliegenden Beitrag werden die Verletzungen des Elchs und die zwei Harpunen neu bewertet. Daraus ergab sich, dass die Verletzungen an den Knochen nichts mit dem Tod des Tieres zu tun haben, sondern vielmehr Relikte der Ausgrabungstechnik sind. Die Harpunen wiederum dokumentieren eine glücklose Jagdepisode mit einem zweizinkigen Fischspeer. Erste Isotopenanalysen der Zähne und Knochen des Elchs zeigen einen eingeschränkten Bewegungsradius der dem Verhalten des heutigen Elchs vollkommen entspricht. Das Tier ernährte sich von verschiedenen aquatischen Pflanzen, die Hinweise auf die Saison des Todeszeitpunkts geben können.

Keywords - Allerød, Elk, Late Upper Palaeolithic, Stable isotopes,
Allerød, Elch, Spätpaläolithikum, stabile Isotopen

Introduction

Nearly half a century ago the complete skeleton of an adult male elk (*Alces alces*) was discovered in Allerød period deposits in the High Furlong area of Poulton-le-Fylde near Blackpool, Lancashire, UK (Hallam et al. 1973). Usually known as either the Poulton or High Furlong Elk, its remains were recovered from proglacial pond deposits in association with two Late Upper Palaeolithic barbed bone points (Fig. 1). The recovery of these points, and the identification of several marks on its bones as lesions apparently produced by flint tipped armatures that were not recovered from the site, lead to the interpretation of the elk as a kill, presumably by Lateglacial Federmessergruppen hunters. Given the apparent variety of weapon systems associated with the elk (the bone points, hypothetical flint tipped arrows and a hypothetical axe seen to 'imply hand-to-hand fighting'), Hallam et al. (1973: 125) concluded that *'the elk was attacked by hunters on at least two separate occasions, the first one or two weeks before death [evidenced by the bone points and one lesion clearly caused by one of these] and the second about the time of death [evidenced by the remaining lesions interpreted as arrows and an axe wound]'*. The distribution of lesions

*corresponding author

Fig. 1. The Poulton Elk articulated for display. Photo courtesy of the Preston Harris Museum.
Abb. 1. *Der museal montierte Poulton Elch. Foto Preston Harris Museum.*

on its skeleton suggested that *'the legs were deliberately aimed at, resulting in two or three successful shots, no mean feat of marksmanship even at short range. It is possible that the bone points may have been attached to drag lines for restraining the animal whilst the hunters took it into captivity or killed it outright by shooting missiles at close range. The latter could well have been the intention of the second attack'* (Hallam et al. 1973: 126).

Despite the apparent severity of the elk's wounds (Hallam et al. 1973: 126) it came not to be butchered and consumed but to rest, intact, at the bottom of a proglacial pond. If the purpose of its killing was to 'capture' it (Hallam et al. 1973: 126) then this clearly failed. If, alternatively, it represents a 'lake sacrifice' (Hallam et al. 1973: 126) we cannot demonstrate this unambiguously. Most discussion of the elk subsequently has perpetuated the 'hail of fire' interpretation.

The elk is curated at the Harris Museum in Preston, Lancashire. Renovation and renewal of its archaeological galleries in 2013 allowed us access to the elk and harpoons for fresh analysis, and the removal of samples of a tooth, rib and antler for isotopic (Sr, C, N, O) measurement. Nearly half a century on since its discovery, we offer here a revised interpretation of